

# **Tsunami**

## **A vision in retrospect**

*Professor Dhammaviari Thera*

Three hundred and sixty five days ago, i.e. on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2005, a calamitous phenomenon had its origin in the coastal areas of Eastern Asia. That was Tsunami, the global disaster, expressing its oceanic wrath and vengeance on unprotected inhabitants in this part of the earth, both man and animal. In this death dealing tragedy, animals are said to have displayed a keener danger-sensing capacity than humans and hence relatively smaller numbers are believed to have been trapped in it and perished. Apparently, man-made, disaster averting devices in the hands of humans had worked less efficiently, no matter due to whose lethargy, and the destruction caused to life and property of humans in every region is said to be incalculably vast and extensive. In Sri Lanka, the devastation caused by Tsunami set up hitherto unknown records.

In situations like these, we humans get unduly paralyzed and put aside all our wisdom and our sense of good judgement. We helplessly look for the cause of these in an area which lies outside our day to day living, outside our logic and our scientific thinking. In death and disaster, and quite often only in such calamitous situations, we turn in the direction of religion as giving us far greater solace and comfort. Even in the midst of this scientific age of space conquest, we are driven to submit ourselves voluntarily to such make-believe demands of religion. This is more so with people who in their day to day living, either at domestic level or in international dealings, pay scant respect to ethics of good living or norms of inter-personal considerations. On account of excessive loyalties to the realm of religion, generating virus-like toxic concepts such as heathens, pagans, infidels and unbelievers, people do forget the principle of live and let live. It is as it were only perils in life that gather people together, unmindful of caste and creed. These invariably are people who in the fabric of

today's over-individualized egoistic living, say more in their daily prayers 'Each man for himself and God help us all'.

All over the world, people began to trace back the origin of last year's Tsunami to various sources, each one according to his own religious creed. Those belonging to theistic religions, all unhesitatingly ascribed Tsunami to the wrath of an angry God who being offended at the sinful behavior of humans punished them in this disastrous manner, but very clearly defended in this heavenly act under the scriptural statement '*vindicta mihi*' that revenge was his right. But for more reasons than one which were quite evident, it is a little too demanding to believe that all those who perished in the recent Tsunami disaster were condemned sinners.

In the vast panorama of ancient Indian religious beliefs too, such thinking is known to have existed. Evil in the world of humans, committed by humans was not, at any rate, very welcome in their midst. Men of religious sobriety wished for a reduction of it and wished to bring about restraints upon it. In the Indian religion of the Vedas, gods began to appear in quick succession within a polytheistic frame to supply this need. Natural phenomena like Rain, Thunder and Lightning assumed formidable stature as gods in the heavens above. The Rain God Parjanya, with his ability to command thunder and lightning, struck dead the evil doers on earth: *Parjanyaḥ sthanayan hanti duskrutah* [R̥g Veda].

Centuries before the commencement of the Christian era, i.e. about the sixth century B. C. India witnessed the birth of a new line of thinking in the person of Śākyamuni Buddha. According to him, the reality of the world was a reality within itself. Laws of the universe, he pronounced, were self-operative. And depended on none outside for their for their operation or manipulation. The Raṭṭhapāla Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya [MN. II.68 f.] records that the Buddha challengingly declared that the world was devoid of security or protection provided externally by anybody or from anywhere. This pronouncement which reads as *attano loko anabhissaro* rejects both external protection from outside for the security of humans of the world or their destinies being guided and directed by external

powers.

To the Buddhists, events like the Tsunami are no more than expressions of the behavior of elemental natural phenomena, sometimes favorable and at others hostile. They knew that unsuspected floods could naturally sweep away with ease sleeping communities of people into the sea as it does often happen in India, America and other places which are culturally so different and diverse. The Dhammapada at Dhp. v. 47 expresses this idea as *suttam gamam mahogho'va maccu adaya gacchati*.

Nor does the involvement of humans in such death-dealing or near death-dealing disasters like earth quakes and storms imply any moral issue like the guilt of involvement in misdeeds by the people caught up in these. Think of the disastrously violent earthquakes which so recurrently take place in California, in the Middle Eastern countries, in India and Japan. Whose wrath and whose guilt lie buried within them? The destiny, i.e. the life after death [and not the death itself], of any one who is trapped in such calamities would be judged in terms of his or her good and bad life style up to the time of the disaster. No redemption or mitigation can be worked out for them from outside. This is referred to as the law of *yatha-bhatam* which means 'pay off according to what one has amassed as one's own *kamma*.'

Tsunami ravaged Sri Lanka, one year ago. The disaster it caused, we are told, has witnessed the death and destruction of nearly forty thousand humans, more or less, in Sri Lanka. This includes men, women and children of all ethnic and religious groups who lived in the land, persons of all age groups, including innocent babies in their cradles and on their mothers' laps. Can any one who ordered or gave the verdict for their destruction wash the guilt off his hands? The world today needs to have a universally acceptable better sense of judgement, in war or in peace, in all areas where it affects its inhabitants. Old world religious ethics, where they assume at times parochial command over others who stand outside their group, have to face re-scrutiny. Let not power blocks of the world today, religious or political, keep throwing the ball from one court to another. This

is more than height of presumption. It is widely known that the dead in Sri Lanka include many distinguished foreigners who, with their Sri Lankan spouses and their children had come home to Sri Lanka to spend a relaxed and joyous holiday here.

What happened in Sri Lanka on that fatal day, one year ago, has happened. There is no going back on it. Our religious philosophy of Buddhism gives us adequate logical explanation as to its genesis, as to who suffered in it and as to why. The dead are gone, gone to yet another life where they would receive their desserts in terms of the life styles they have lived, in terms of thought, word and deed. These are self-dictated dues that should come to them. Even a basic simple assessment would reveal that considerably large numbers of good harmless people who happened to be quite unwittingly within the range of violence of the Tsunami were pitiably destroyed. Here we need to learn two lessons as Buddhists. One is that the world of physical existence, nay the entire universe, is subject to the laws of evolution and devolution, by whatever name one calls this process, BIG BANG and BIG CRUNCH or yet any other. And within it, the universal process of change is continually taking place all the time, seen or unseen by man. The Tsunami was just one manifestation of that vast complex process.

The Buddhist theory of transcendence in Nirvana gets the human beyond and out of this phenomenal world of physical elemental violence. It is sad and lamentable if one has not read or even had the good fortune to be told about the lines at the end of the Kevaḍḍha Sutta in the Digha Nikaya [DN. I. 223] where it unmistakably says that elements like earth, water, heat and air assail not one who has ascended to the transcendental state of Nirvana.

*Vinnanam anidassanam anantam sabbaso pabham*

*Ettha apo ca pathavi ca tejo vayo na ghadati.*

*Ettha dighan ca rassam ca anum thulam subhasubham*

*Ettha namam ca rupam ca asesam uparujjhati*

*Vinnaṇassa nirodhena etth'etam uparujjhati.*

The second lesson we need to learn or be grimly reminded about is the reality and inevitability of death of all that have come to the world to live. ` To those that are born there is no escape from death' say the Buddhist teachings: *Natthi jatassa amaranam*. Therefore, fully conscious of the reality of death, we rise up on this occasion to think of all those who perished in the Tsunami disaster with a deep sense of appreciation for whatever they had done, in their own way, for the well-being of the world they lived in. This is truly the manner in which the living can pay tribute to their dead, no matter in which bank our remittances on their behalf get credited. As the texts say: *Petanam dakkhinam dajja pubbe katam anussaram*. This means: One makes charitable gifts on behalf of those who have departed, bringing to mind what they had done while living with us.

Now a word of national admiration and appreciation for the manner in which the Sri Lankans as a totality and the world community reacted on this occasion of this island-wide national disaster. When the heart of good people tremble on seeing the pain and anguish of others, we call this in Buddhism compassion or *karuṇa: para-dukkhe sati sadhunaṃ hadaya-kampanam karoti*. In other words, it is sympathetic reaction. With a preponderantly large demographic percentage, i.e. nearly seventy per cent, of Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka and that dating back to more than twenty-three centuries, Sri Lankans have an invariable record of sympathetic reaction towards all beings, human and animals, in disastrous and calamitous situations. Nay, this is to exist in their minds all the time. *Sukhino va khemino hontu sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*. Sn. v. 145.

It has been recorded by many foreign historians and travelers through this country that this virtue of the majority community has worked its way into the nerve and fiber of all its inhabitants, irrespective of religious and cultural differences. Tsunami in Sri Lanka one year ago was a multifaceted disaster. It saw the waters of the mighty ocean which once gracefully circled this little pearl of Sri Lanka for generations unknown, both in the north and the south and in the east and the west, swallowing up ferociously and mercilessly, not only its own

friendly neighbors, the coast-line dwellers, but also hundreds upon hundreds of visiting admirers. Their sudden and total disappearance out of sight made the grief, on the whole, less convulsive.

But those left on the land, maimed and mutilated, alive and dead, they were a challenge to human compassion and sympathy. They were everywhere, battered and beaten in the raging waters, with crushed and broken limbs under falling trees and crashing buildings. The harmlessness and innocence of these bleeding and groaning victims, unlike the wounded in a battle field, summoned every one for assistance. Buddhist monks from our temples in every part of the affected areas rushed out to the scenes of disaster to offer every manner of assistance needed.

The temples were not, to begin with first aid centers. Neither cotton wool nor bandages, surgical spirit nor Dettol were available at hand. Nevertheless, the temples pulled out of their linen cupboards all material like bed sheets and pillow cases, towels and table cloth and even their spare robes to dress and comfort the wounded. We record with admiration and appreciation that all others, men and women, surviving the disaster, irrespective of caste and creed, joined this service brigade to lend whatever service they could. So were the medical personnel, doctors and nurses. This immediately comforted and relieved the injured and the wounded, physically and mentally.

Those rendered homeless, needed places to stay, places that would offer them physical shelter and mental security. Security via religion was obviously uppermost in their mind. So they all made a bee-line to the *pansala*, the Buddhist *vihara* and other places of religious security. Religion began to dominate the scene.

The monks hastened too, having attended to the injured and the wounded, to organize the supply of food to the deserted, including milk for the children. The lay patrons of the temples, the *dāyakas* rallied round the monks day and night, offering whatever assistance they could. All these persons, the Buddhist monks

and the laymen and persons of all other religious faiths who came forward in this hour of need deserve our unstinted grateful thanks and our highest admiration for the services they have rendered. We shall have them clearly engraved in our history.

The philanthropy of the Buddhist monks is known to have gone even further. Monks living in this country as well as some living abroad have already set up funds for building houses to rehabilitate those who have lost theirs in the Tsunami disaster. Even schools and hospitals have come within this area of assistance. The magnanimity displayed in these acts of rehabilitation is highly commendable. The religio-cultural texture that has hitherto prevailed in the country has, under all circumstances, to be left intact.

Quite like the old saying that beggars cannot choosers, there is much more ethical soundness in the stand that 'givers cannot be choosers'. We definitely say that there is absolutely no moral goodness in giving with an eye on gain or glory for the giver, more honorably referred to in the present circumstances as donors. Grieved and afflicted people must not be, with the offer of attractive alternatives, big or small, rooted out of their religio-cultural moorings. It would be globally humiliating, if any were discovered indulging in this kind of activity, now or later. We would unequivocally call this a heinous crime. It would invariably lead to the need for post-Tsunami Nuremberg-like trials.

We pray and pray aloud that no big brother, or even a small one, find in this situation in Sri Lanka a chance to fish in troubled waters. Offer no assistance to rob or plunder another, in tragic circumstances like these and deprive the helpless and the needy of their birth rights. We pray scrape off not their cultural residues, lying at this moment, parched no more than at the bottom of the pan.